CHAPTER NINE

RACISM FOR BEGINNERS: CONSTRUCTIONS OF CHINESE IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY BELGIAN COMICS

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Comics are amidst Belgium’s major export products. Some of them are world-famous and have been translated into dozens of languages: Hergé’s Tintin, Morris’ Lucky Luke, and Peyo’s Smurfs. Willy Vandersteen’s Suske and Wiske is known as Bob and Bobette in France, as Willy and Wanda in the U.S., as Spike and Suzy in the U.K., and as Ulla and Peter in Germany. Other comic characters have gained an equal popularity with generations of Belgian readers, albeit without having conquered an international readership: Jef Nys’ Jommeke, Marc Sleen’s Nero, and Merho’s Kiekeboe. Newspapers published comics series every day for decades, using them as a competitive strategy for gaining more readers. On top of that, there were weekly magazines devoted to comics: Le Journal de Spirou published by the Dupuis company and Tintin published by the Studios Hergé. The stories only appeared in book form after they were serialized in newspapers.

This peculiarly Belgian comic culture has admittedly declined in recent decades. Initially, one tried to stop the development by adapting television and movie characters into comic form (e.g. Willy Linthout’s and Urbanus’ Urbanus and Hec Leemans’ De kampioenen), but the internet seems to have dealt comics a serious blow. This loss of popularity has also been fueled by increasing ethnic diversity (immigrant children read far fewer post-war comics than native Belgian children) and the decreasing division of society and the media along Socialist, Catholic and other lines. Nevertheless, comics still play a key role in Belgian collective memory. Many Belgian cities have statues or museums devoted to comic heroes. Brussels is proud of its comic murals, has declared 2009 as the year of comics, and claims to be the world capital of comics. Because they were popular among readers of all ages, comics have had a major impact on the creation of images and the perception of foreign cultures and local history. Given their great appeal and their visual character, it is possible

1 Baudart, 2005.
to argue that comics, along with youth encyclopedias, were even more influential than novels or newspapers.

The construction of the “other” in comics has already been the subject of scientific research and broad social interest, both in Belgium and abroad. The racism and anti-Semitism that had characterized several major comic authors has gained much attention in particular. In 2007, Hergé’s *Tintin in Congo* was condemned by the U.K. Commission for Racial Equality for its hideous racial prejudice. Tintin’s spiritual father is also accused of anti-Semitism. Marc Sleen, who regularly went on Safari to Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, was censored by his own newspaper when he drew an African politician as a gorilla. In 2010, Willy Vandersteen was identified as the cartoonist of Nazi caricatures that appeared in a Flemish journal during World War II. However, the existing analysis of racism in Belgian comics is limited to the representation of Africans and Jews. This chapter attempts to examine the depiction of China and Chinese in Belgian comics. It will do so chronologically and focus on racist rather than cultural characterizations of the Chinese.

*Tintin’s Fight with Racism against the Chinese*

One of the main reasons for why the research on images of the Other in comics has been confined to Africans and Jews is *The Blue Lotus* (1934): the first major encounter of a Belgian comic hero with China. With increasing Japanese interference in China lying in the background, Tintin travels to Shanghai in order to fight an international gang of opium dealers which regularly meets in a local opium den, the Blue Lotus. This book is considered a watershed in Hergé’s *oeuvre*. While Tintin’s artistic father had represented other countries in a very stereotypical way in his previous books, he was now praised for the accurate depiction of China. He researched his topic thoroughly and was assisted by Zhang Chongren, a Chinese artist who studied in Brussels between 1931 and 1935. Zhang and Hergé developed a friendship that has fired many people’s imagination:

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3 Kerremans and Lefèvre, 1997: 41.
4 De Koning, 2011.